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# Between Fire and Mirror: Ibrāhīm Gulistān's Cinematic Journey

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## Introduction

Through his ground-breaking work as a director, Ibrāhīm Gulistān, has significantly influenced Iranian cinematic traditions. His work is characterized by a combination of reality accuracy and poetic expression, integrating rhythmic editing, figurative imagery, and lyrical narration to produce a distinct cinematic language. Gulistān himself compared filmmaking to “writing with a camera rather than a pen,”<sup>1</sup> expressing his conviction that cinema is an artistic medium that is comparable to literature.

Poetic cinema, a trend that emphasizes symbolic imagery and visual composition over conventional plot-driven storytelling, has a strong influence on Gulistān's filmmaking. Non-linear narrative is frequently used in poetic film, which aims to provoke strong feelings or introspective thoughts rather than provide definitive answers. In *Poetry and Prose in Cinematography*, Viktor Shklovsky (1927) argues that a poetic cinema is organized around formal techniques rather than traditional narrative progression. He contends that poetry and film both have the ability to defamiliarize everyday events and force viewers to interact with the environment in novel ways.<sup>2</sup> In Gulistān's films, commonplace occurrences are turned into metaphors for more general sociopolitical and existential concerns. This idea, known as “ostranenie” or “defamiliarization,” is central in his work. Gulistān contributed to the redefining of Iranian cinema

by fusing this artistic sensibility with documentary realism.

The foundation for the Iranian New Wave, a cinematic movement that arose in the 1960s in opposition to commercialized narratives, was laid by Gulistān's vision. The New Wave, seriously influenced by European art cinema—mainly Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave—was characterized by a departure from traditional melodrama in favor of realism, social critique, and poetic imagery.<sup>3</sup> Through innovative story structures, realistic performances, and location-based filming, these movies frequently examined existential themes, moral dilemmas, and sociopolitical difficulties.

In addition to Gulistān early signs of New Wave aesthetics were evident in the works of filmmakers such as Farrukh Ghaffārī and Hazhīr Dāryūsh, who were not only directors but also active film critics and writers. They used “their writing to challenge the prevailing conventions of Iranian cinema and advocate for art and quality films, positioning themselves as significant critics of the established cinematic norms.”<sup>4</sup> Gulistān, in particular, pushed New Wave aesthetics through his fusion of documentary realism and poetic cinema, which influenced later directors such as Dāryūsh Mehrjū'ī, Suhrāb Shahīd Sālis, and 'Abbās Kiyārustamī.

After switching from writing and photography to filmmaking in the late 1950s, Gulistān started his cinematic career. He started off making documentaries before branching out into narrative films. In 1957, he founded Gulistān Film Studio, which played a significant role in forming contemporary Iranian cinema.

A significant factor that indirectly supported this cinematic evolution was the oil concession, a historical agreement between Iran and a consortium of Western oil companies following the 1953 coup. According to scholars such as Hamid Naficy and Negar Mottahedeh, this economic agreement provided financial resources that allowed for the development of Iranian

<sup>1</sup>Parviz Jahed, *Nivishtan bā dūrbīn: Rūdarrū bā Ibrāhīm Gulistān* [Writing with the Camera: Face to Face with Ibrāhīm Gulistān] (Tehran: Akhtarān, 2005), 147.

<sup>2</sup>Viktor Shklovsky, “Poetry and Prose in Cinematography,” *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 25–34.

<sup>3</sup>Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978* (Duke University Press, 2011), 232.

<sup>4</sup>Parviz Jahed, *The New Wave Cinema in Iran: A Critical Study* (Bloomsbury Academic, Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2022), 116.

<sup>5</sup>Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011, 73.; Mottahedeh, Negar. “Crude Extractions: The Voice in Iranian Cinema” In *Locating the Voice in Film: Critical Approaches and Global Practices*, edited by Tom Whittaker and Sarah Wright, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 228.

<sup>6</sup>Negar Mottahedeh, “Crude Extractions: The Voice in Iranian Cinema,” In *Locating the Voice in Film: Critical Approaches and Global Practices*, ed. Tom Whittaker and Sarah Wright, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 227.

<sup>7</sup>Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978* (Duke University Press, 2011), 76.

<sup>8</sup>Shiva Rahbaran, *Iranian Cinema Uncensored: Contemporary Film-Makers Since the Islamic Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2016), 131.

cinema beyond commercial formulas.<sup>5</sup> This financial stability enabled filmmakers like Gulistān to experiment with poetic realism and social critique, elevating both documentary and narrative filmmaking to aesthetic and intellectual milestones.<sup>6</sup> Because of this, Gulistān’s films are well known for their lyrical style, which combines powerful sociocultural commentary with eye-catching visual composition. The funding allayed worries about production expenses, allowing him to make films that delved into the intricacies of the human condition while breaking with the traditional, formulaic narrative that had before dominated Iranian filmmaking.

Through his Film Studio, Gulistān played a pivotal role in producing documentaries that portrayed Iran as both a modernizing nation and a repository of ancient cultural heritage. Poetic realism, which combines lyrical expression with social critique to “subvert traditional, propagandistic documentary methods,”<sup>7</sup> is the best way to characterize Gulistān’s cinematic legacy. Gulistān stayed firmly grounded in realism, employing poetic elements to enhance—rather than obscure—meaning,<sup>8</sup> in contrast to directors who used abstract or symbolic representations to get around restrictions. His films are distinguished by: Rhythmic editing that determines the tone and tempo of the picture; evocative narrative that deepens the theme; and striking imagery that turns ordinary reality into metaphor.

This is especially evident in Gulistān’s films that combine lyrical imagery with factual observation, such as *A Fire* (1961) and *Wave, Coral, and Rock* (1962). In *A Fire*, Gulistān employs an observational realist approach to document an oil well fire; yet through his poetic narration and the sequencing of images, he transforms the fragmented visuals into a meditation on industrialization and a critique of humanity’s impact on nature. Similar to this, *Wave, Coral, and Rock* uses landscape cinematography as a metaphor for industrialization by contrasting the natural world with human interference. For later New Wave filmmakers who aimed to portray Iranian culture with more nuance and



creative inventiveness, these films act as basic texts.

<sup>9</sup>Hamid Dabashi, *Masters & Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema* (Mage Publishers, 2007), 74.

Gulistān further showcased his versatility as a filmmaker by branching out into narrative filmmaking, building on his experience in documentaries. His uplifting film *Brick and Mirror* (1965) explores existential issues and human connections in a harsh and reflective manner. The movie is an example of documentary-style realism, which includes genuine performances and on-location filming, as well as fragmented storytelling, which emphasizes themes of ambiguity, loss, and societal unrest. This film also contained film noir aesthetics, which feature lengthy takes and shadow-heavy photography.

Gulistān's career shows a constant progression rather than a shift from one medium to another, with his narrative works being influenced by his documentary sensibility. His fusion of social criticism with poetic realism established him as a forerunner of the New Wave movement, impacting later filmmakers like Muhsin Makhmalbāf, 'Abbās Kiyārustamī, and Dāryūsh Mehrjū'ī.

He made incomparable contributions to Iranian cinema. He expanded the possibilities of visual narrative by fusing socio-political commentary, documentary realism, and poetic cinema. His influence on Iranian and international cinema will live on as his legacy continues to motivate modern filmmakers.

### Early Life and Career

Gulistān was born on October 19, 1922, in Shiraz, Iran. He first attended Tehran University to study law, but he left before earning his degree to get involved in politics. He became a member of the Tūdah Party, a 1941-founded Iranian Marxist-Leninist political group renowned for its support of socialism and ties to the Soviet Union. However, the party was outlawed after the 1953 coup, which made many of its members—including Gulistān—rethink their political participation.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Parviz Jahed, "Ibrāhīm Gulistān: Naft va Film-i Mustanad," Phoenix News, August 27, 2023, Accessed July 30, 2024. <https://phoenixnews.ca/ابراهیم-گلستان-نفت-و-فیلم-مستند/>.

<sup>11</sup>Parviz Jahed, "Ibrāhīm Gulistān: Naft va Film-i Mustanad," Phoenix News, August 27, 2023, Accessed July 30, 2024. <https://phoenixnews.ca/ابراهیم-گلستان-نفت-و-فیلم-مستند/>.

<sup>12</sup>Parviz Jahed, Nivishtan bā dūrbīn: Rūdarrū bā Ibrāhīm Gulistān [Writing with the Camera: Face to Face with Ibrāhīm Gulistān] (Tehran: Akhtarān, 2005), 115.

<sup>13</sup>Ebrahim Norouzi and Arash Norouzi, "Filmmaker Ebrahim Golestan Remembers 1953 Coup in Iran," Mohammad Mossadegh Website, August 29, 2014, accessed June 22, 2025, <https://www.mohammadmossadegh.com/news/ebrahim-golestan/>.

Gulistān started translating and authoring articles for Tūdah Party publications, such as the journals *Rahbar va Mardum*, in 1944. Later, he opposed the group headed by Khalīl Malīkī, whom he thought wanted to create a Communist Party in Iran that was sanctioned by the Soviet Union. Consequently, Gulistān joined the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1947 after departing from the Tūdah Party. Some scholars claim that "the real history of documentary cinema in Iran begins with the films he made for the Oil Company."<sup>10</sup> A representative of the International News Service (INS) approached Gulistān during this period and urged him to get someone to record the important events taking place in the city. Rather, Gulistān took up the duty himself and chronicled these occurrences, which accompanied the political turmoil that followed the nationalization of oil in 1951.<sup>11</sup>

When oil was nationalized, I was in the oil company. And besides working in the company, I was doing other things. I am talking about an era in which television had not yet reached Iran. I was working for NBC and CBS and making news reports for them. It was very easy. At that time, I was in Abadan and one of my friends called Fenzy introduced me to INS (International News Service). They asked Fenzy to find someone who could film the incidents happening in Abadan. It was the time of the forcible dispossession of the British in Abadan. I told them I will do it for you.<sup>12</sup>

Gulistān quickly came to the conclusion that his income from making newsreels was more than his pay from the oil firm, which led him to concentrate on making news films. When he documented significant moments of Dr. Muhammad Musaddiq's political collapse during the 1953 coup, his work became well-known. Days prior to the coup, he had gone to Musaddiq's house, filmed there, and captured the house's ensuing devastation. His photographs and videos, which show the looting and destruction of Musaddiq's home, are still among the most striking documentation of the chaos that followed the coup.<sup>13</sup>



Following the coup, the newly formed Iran-England Oil Consortium established a film and photography unit, appointing Gulistān as its head. During this time, he made *From a Drop to the Sea* (*Az qatraḥ tā daryā*, 1957), his first significant documentary. Gulistān's abilities were later acknowledged by the consortium, which was mostly under Shell's control. After viewing one of Gulistān's films, a former Shell oil engineer in Egypt who had become the company's operations director in Iran asked Gulistān to be added to the consortium's film unit.<sup>14</sup>

In this role, Gulistān oversaw all of the consortium's photography and video projects, which helped him hone his craft and develop a name for himself as a top documentary filmmaker.<sup>15</sup> His 1956 film *A Fire*, which took home the Bronze Lion at the Venice Film Festival, marked his international debut. Gulistān's reputation was solidified by the film's popularity, which also signaled the start of his investigation into more intricate storylines.

Shell financed Gulistān's film training trip to the Netherlands, England, and France in 1957. Shell's head of film production, Arthur Elton, initially refused a meeting with Gulistān, but after viewing one of his pieces, Elton traveled to Tehran. This meeting was crucial because it allowed Gulistān to formally establish Gulistān Film Studio and legitimize his relationship with Shell. Gulistān bought land and constructed a cutting-edge studio to meet the expanding needs of the film industry. The initial investment was made by Shell, but Gulistān later expanded the studio through his own film productions. *Wave*, *Coral*, and *Rock* was the first show produced by the new studio. His brother Shāhrukh Gulistān, as well as Karīm Imāmī, Mahmūd Hingvāl, Furūgh Farrukhzād, Solomon Mīnassian, and Ismā'īl Rā'in were all members of his crew,<sup>16</sup> and they all made significant contributions to the development of contemporary Iranian cinema.

While documentaries demonstrated his technical prowess,

<sup>14</sup>Parviz Jahed, *Nivishtan bā dūrbīn: Rūdarrū bā Ibrāhīm Gulistān* [Writing with the Camera: Face to Face with Ibrāhīm Gulistān] (Tehran: Akhtarān, 2005), 276.

<sup>15</sup>Parviz Jahed, *Nivishtan bā dūrbīn: Rūdarrū bā Ibrāhīm Gulistān* [Writing with the Camera: Face to Face with Ibrāhīm Gulistān] (Tehran: Akhtarān, 2005), 122-124.

<sup>16</sup>Parviz Jahed, *Nivishtan bā dūrbīn: Rūdarrū bā Ibrāhīm Gulistān* [Writing with the Camera: Face to Face with Ibrāhīm Gulistān] (Tehran: Akhtarān, 2005), 133-134.

Gulistān's desire for a more profound artistic expression led to his feature film debut in 1965 with *The Brick and the Mirror*. This intricate and poetic examination of Tehran's working-class life, characterized by lyrical narration, symbolic imagery, and a dreamlike quality, was praised by critics and is regarded as an influential work in Iranian cinema. Gulistān then became a major force in Iranian cinema, leaving a lasting impression with his inventive approach to both documentary and feature film-making, fusing realism with poetic abstraction.

In addition to *Brick and Mirror*, Gulistān was a key producer of Furūgh Farrukhzād's inspiring documentary *The House Is Black* (*Khānah Siyāh Ast*, 1962). One of the most important documentaries in Iranian cinema, the film depicted the life of leprosy sufferers with a never-before-seen fusion of poetic storytelling with realism. In addition, Gulistān directed the experimental allegory *The Secrets of the Treasure of the Jinn Valley* (1974), which examined themes of social degradation, modernity, and avarice. The increasing discontent in Iranian society was predicted by this movie, which was generally seen as a critique of the excesses of the Pahlavī dictatorship.

Years before the 1979 Revolution, Gulistān fled Iran for England in the mid-1970s, seeing the political turmoil that was about to occur. He had long been an outspoken opponent of the Shah's policies, especially those pertaining to authoritarianism and corruption, but he was also cautious of the revolutionary forces that aimed to topple the monarchy. In retrospect, his last movie, *The Secrets of the Treasure of the Jinn Valley* (1974), has been seen as a prophetic allegory of the revolution, showing a society on the verge of disintegration as a result of unbridled materialism and moral deterioration.

At the age of 100, Ibrāhīm Gulistān died on August 22, 2023, in his home in Sussex, England. Even though he lived far from Iran at the end of his life, generations of Iranian artists have been influenced by his writings and films. His reputation as a



trailblazing filmmaker, astute social commentator, and literary genius endures.

## Documentary Filmmaking

Iranian documentary filmmaking began in the early 1900s and mostly focused on recording everyday happenings and real-life events, frequently with little to no artistic or fictional interpretation. Instead of using creative or dramatic depictions, this style relied on factual video and simple storytelling tactics in an effort to express reality as faithfully as possible. Without the impact of artistic embellishment or fictional aspects sometimes seen in other styles of filmmaking, the aim was to capture and portray the reality of the event. *Jashn-i Gul'hā* (Carnival of Flowers), a documentary, was the earliest Iranian film ever known to exist. It was produced in 1900. Mirza Ibrāhīm Khan 'Akkāsbāshī Sanī' al-Saltanah took this video while Muzaffar al-Dīn Shah was at Ostend, Belgium. The Shah is shown in the movie taking part in a "flower parade," in which he joyfully throws flowers back at women on moving carriages. Documentary filmmaking in Iran began with this event.<sup>17</sup>

Iranian documentary cinema expanded significantly in the 1960s and 1970s due to historical and cultural concerns, such as the study of modernity, social transformation, and national identity. Iran's progress in infrastructure, industrialization, and education, as well as the changes in society brought about by the nation's fast modernization and urbanization, were frequently highlighted by government commissions during this time. A major factor in this period was the founding of Iranian National Television (NIRT) in 1966, which promoted the creation and dissemination of documentaries. Significant contributions were made by pioneers like Mustafā Farzānah, Gulistān, and Ghaffārī, who combined modernist methods with historical themes. With pieces like *From a Drop to the Sea*, created in the later part of the 1950s, Gulistān in particular had a significant impact. His documentaries established the foundation for in-

<sup>17</sup>Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 1: The Artisanal Years, 1897–1941* (Duke University Press, 2011), 44.

<sup>18</sup>Mansūr Pūyān, “Tappah-hā-yi Mārlik: Mustanadī Shā’irānah [Mārlik Hills: A Poetic Documentary],” *Nāfah Monthly* 12, no. 45 (2011): 89.

dependent cinema in Iran by introducing novel techniques and departing from conventional forms, especially for the National Iranian Oil Company.<sup>18</sup>

Iranian documentary filmmaking was significantly influenced by Gulistān’s efforts. His method blended documentary truth with artistic expression to create visually arresting and thought-provoking films. His filmmaking was innovative in Iran because it combined poetic sensibility with a critical eye toward societal issues, both in his documentary and narrative films. Gulistān was able to incorporate his critical viewpoints into his work even though he was commissioned by organizations such as the National Iranian Oil Company. This is especially noteworthy when considering state commissions that frequently aimed to portray industrial advancement in a favorable light.

His relationship with the oil industry and his ability to subtly critique it deserves further exploration. In documentaries like *A Fire*, he not only showcased the industrial processes of the oil industry but also critiqued the colonial aspects of foreign control over Iran’s resources. By emphasizing the harsh and dangerous working conditions faced by local workers, he highlighted the power dynamics and exploitation embedded in the oil industry. His approach went beyond simply documenting the labor process; it revealed the broader socio-political implications, subtly questioning the impacts of Western colonialism and Iran’s dependence on foreign industries. This critical stance was expressed through eloquent narration and striking visuals, which were not merely decorative but served to underscore the emotional and intellectual weight of the issues he was addressing.

Because of their depth of thought and inventive storytelling, Gulistān’s films set a high bar for upcoming directors. Modern Iranian documentarians have shifted their focus toward more realistic and everyday themes, such as personal stories, the everyday lives of ordinary people, social issues like pov-



erty, women's rights, and urbanization, as well as the effects of modernity on traditional ways of life. This is in contrast to Gulistān's films, which frequently explored philosophical, sociopolitical, and historical themes with intellectual depth. These more grounded subjects reflect a shift in priorities toward immediate, observable realities. Despite this shift, Gulistān's innovative techniques and narrative style remain influential.

Whether they are about the oil business or crown jewels, Gulistān's films are distinguished by a singular fusion of powerful imagery and poetic narrative. His dedication to fusing artistic expression with documentary truth is highlighted by his storytelling style, which was greatly impacted by his experience writing short stories. His impact in the profession was cemented by his ability to create storylines that were both visually striking and intellectually challenging because of his affinity for literature. His documentaries stood out in Iranian cinema because he was able to incorporate the subtleties of fiction writing while keeping a factual, instructional tone. Gulistān's work, often regarded as educational films by the fine arts, gained international acclaim, with notable awards such as the Golden Mercury Award and the Lion of Saint Mark medals, marking a significant milestone in Iranian cinema history.

Despite some critiques labeling his films as commissioned works, Gulistān defended the inherent value in all films, asserting that the notion of "commissioned" does not diminish their artistic or intellectual merit. Critics of his work, however, have noted how Gulistān subtly integrated his critical views into films even when commissioned by the National Iranian Oil Company, including one directly requested by the Shah. According to film scholars, this integration is evident in his narration, which often infused his poetic sensibility to convey a critical stance on the colonial aspects of the oil industry. For instance, in *A Fire*, Gulistān marvels at the skill of oil craftsmen while simultaneously drawing attention to the harsh and dangerous working conditions faced by local workers.<sup>19</sup> This nuanced approach not

<sup>19</sup>Roya Khoshnevis, "Muvā-jahā-yi Naft dar Sīnimā-yi Irān: Kār'gāh-i Film-i Ibrāhīm Gulistān [Oil Encounters in Iranian Cinema: The Studio of Ibrāhīm Gulistān's Films]," *Dunyā-yi Iqtisād* 6061 (August 2, 2024). <https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/fa/tiny/news-3997081>.

<sup>20</sup>Parviz Jahed, "Ibrāhīm Gulistān: Naft va Film-i Mustanad," *Phoenix News*, August 27, 2023, Accessed July 30, 2024. <https://phoenixnews.ca/ابراهیم-گلستان-نفت-و-فیلم-مستند/>.

<sup>21</sup>Muhammad Tahāmīnizhād, "Mīrās-i Ibrāhīm Gulistān dar Sīnimā-yi Mustanad [Ibrāhīm Gulistān's Legacy in Documentary Cinema]," *Farhang-i Imrūz*, January 25, 2015, accessed June 22, 2025, <https://www.farhangemrooz.com/news/27477/-ابراهیم-گلستان-در-سینمای-مستند>.

only elevates the visual and narrative quality of his work but also reflects his ability to challenge authority, even within the constraints of commissioned content.

While the Gulistān's "authoritative" aspect of his documentaries narration grounded the content in factual, informational presentation, the "poetic" element infused his films with a layer of artistic expression, allowing for a deeper emotional and intellectual engagement with the subject matter. This innovative fusion "transformed the documentary genre, setting a high standard for future filmmakers, leaving a lasting legacy in Iranian cinema."<sup>20</sup>

Though some critics such as Tahāmīnizhād have argued that Gulistān's poetic narrative style occasionally overshadowed the informational content of his films, this approach added aesthetic depth and intellectual complexity.<sup>21</sup> His films went beyond simple documentation—they engaged viewers not only with the facts but with the human and social dimensions of those facts. In contrast, contemporary Iranian documentarians have often shifted toward more pragmatic themes, focusing on everyday life and personal experiences with an emphasis on clear, unembellished reality. These filmmakers tend to address social, political, and cultural issues in a direct, often journalistic manner.

After the coup d'état of August 19, 1953, Gulistān, who had taken on the role of managing the photo and news department for the Iranian oil consortium, used both his personal news films and footage shot with his own camera to create a documentary. In 1957, he traveled to southern Iran to film oil extraction, resulting in his first major documentary, *From a Drop to the Sea*. The film was well-received by the French head of the Consortium and Arthur Elton, the renowned English documentary filmmaker and head of the film department at Shell UK and marked the beginning of Gulistān's documentary filmmaking career.



From a Drop to the Sea was noted for the contrast between its visually striking imagery and its narration. The film's powerful and dynamic visuals, which captured the oil extraction process and the landscape of southern Iran, were widely praised for their aesthetic appeal and storytelling ability. In contrast, the narration, while informative, sometimes felt overly simplistic and struggled to match the depth conveyed by the visuals. While the images were vivid and conveyed much of the story on their own, the narration aimed to express ideas that were more abstract or complex, leading to a sense of tension between the two elements. This contrast between imagery and narration highlighted the film's blending of artistic vision with documentary realism, and it contributed to the film's unique impact on Iranian cinema.

However, not all reactions were entirely positive. Bahrām Bayzā'ī, a prominent filmmaker at the time, critiqued Gulistān's use of narration, noting that it often conveyed ideas that could not be fully captured visually, leading to simplifications. Additionally, Bayzā'ī observed that the film's structure felt somewhat fragmented and lengthy, with non-cinematic elements contributing to its duration. According to him,

Gulistān used narration to express ideas that could not be fully captured visually, often resulting in a degree of simplification. The film's structure was somewhat fragmented and extended due to non-cinematic elements, with secondary sections contributing to its length.<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, its grandiose narration, national music, vibrant color, and dynamic movement garnered considerable praise from audiences. Following this success, Gulistān resigned from his at the oil consortium and founded the Gulistān Film Studio, which went on to produce several notable documentaries, including *Perspective* (Chashm'andāz).<sup>23</sup>

This documentary series, *Perspective*, directed by Gulistān and

<sup>22</sup>Bahrām Bayzā'ī, "Kārnāmah-yi Film-i Gulistān," *Ārash* 5 (1962): 52.

<sup>23</sup>Parviz Jahed, ed. *Directory of World Cinema: Iran* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2012), 88.

<sup>24</sup>Negar Mottahedeh, "Crude Extractions: The Voice in Iranian Cinema," In *Locating the Voice in Film: Critical Approaches and Global Practices*, ed. Tom Whittaker and Sarah Wright (Oxford University Press, 2017), 233.

produced between 1957 and 1962. Commissioned by the Oil Consortium, the collection includes *A Fire*, *Wave*, *Coral*, and *Rock*, and *Water and Heat* (*Āb u Ātash*, 1962), each exploring different aspects of Iranian industry, environment, and modernity. These films exemplify Gulistān's distinctive cinematic style, which blends poetic narration with striking visual compositions. His approach is marked by an intricate relationship between text and image, where narration does not merely describe what is seen but adds layers of meaning, sometimes through contrast or abstraction.

Gulistān's early works are often divided into two periods: his industrial documentaries and his later, more personal and stylistically experimental films. *A Fire* (1956), produced during his collaboration with the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), belongs to the former category. As part of the *Perspective* series, this documentary marks a significant milestone in Iranian cinema, capturing one of the most catastrophic oil-well fires in history. The fire, which burned for 65 days in Ahvāz, serves as both the film's dramatic centerpiece and a broader symbol of human struggle against nature. Rather than relying solely on the inherent drama of the event, he crafts a carefully structured narrative that juxtaposes powerful imagery with a restrained, epigrammatic voice-over. The narration employs precise, poetic phrasing that enhances the film's rhythm and impact. His use of concise, evocative language mirrors his cinematic economy, ensuring that every word and image contributes to a cohesive and immersive viewing experience.

Mottahedeh's observation that the poetics of the opening of *A Fire* is crucially cinematic, highlights how the film intricately weaves together text, imagery, sound, and narration to create an emotional resonance.<sup>24</sup> Each element serves not just to inform, but to deepen the viewer's emotional engagement, much like the distinct notes of a musical composition. It opens with the image of the well being drilled near Ahvāz, which soon transitions into the explosive eruption of fire. The on-screen text and



voiceover draw attention to the sudden ignition: “suddenly a spark flew.” The initial scene captures the overwhelming scale of the fire, dwarfing the firefighters as the camera lingers on the thick smoke. Gulistān’s narration imbues the technical struggle with a poetic quality, focusing on the human effort to control the destructive power of nature. The juxtaposition of the “Danger Well Drilling” sign with the raging inferno establishes a stark contrast between the advancing force of technology and the uncontrollable might of nature.

<sup>25</sup>Roya Khoshnevis, “Crude oil and its false promises of modernization: Petroleum encounters in modern Iranian fiction,” (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2021), 122-125.



Figure 1: A close-up of a sign reading “DANGER WELL DRILLING IN” with Persian script above. A still from the film *A Fire* (*Ātash*), directed by Ibrāhīm Gulistān, 1958–1961.

The sequence in which the fire is fought with water from the Kārūn River powerfully emphasizes the scale and intensity of the battle against nature’s force. Gulistān introduces Myron Kinely, an American expert in oil firefighting, whose technical prowess is portrayed as almost magical, positioning him as a symbol of Western technological superiority. His methods, notably using water from the Kārūn River to extinguish the flames, are presented with a sense of awe, yet this technological solution starkly contrasts with the quiet, relentless perseverance of the local Iranian laborers.<sup>25</sup> The camera’s careful focus on the Iranian workers—often silhouetted by the fire—depicts their grueling, labor-intensive efforts, humanizing them in ways that

emphasize their endurance and resilience.

This contrast between the sophisticated foreign expertise and the uncelebrated, yet vital, contributions of the Iranian workers critiques the broader effects of industrialization on both the land and its people. The fire, a byproduct of the oil extraction process, represents the destructive side of progress, while the local workers' physical labor underscores the human cost of industrialization. Their toil is juxtaposed against the seemingly effortless success of foreign intervention, suggesting a power imbalance where the benefits of industrial advancements largely favor outsiders, while the local community bears the brunt of the hardship.



Figure 2: Iranian laborers, silhouetted by the fire, engaged in grueling efforts to combat the oil well fire. A still from the film *A Fire* (*Ātash*), directed by Ibrāhīm Gulistān, 1958–1961.

As the fire is eventually subdued through the “magic power of an explosion,” a dramatic shift occurs in the film’s visual storytelling. The camera lingers on the blackened faces of the workers, capturing their exhaustion and the deep physical toll the operation has taken on them. These close-up shots serve as a stark reminder of the grueling reality behind the success of the oil industry. Despite the fire’s eventual suppression, the laborers’ faces convey the unspoken price of industrial triumph, as

they return to their difficult, often thankless work.

<sup>26</sup>Parviz Jahed, ed. *Directory of World Cinema: Iran* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2012), 106.

In these moments, *Gulistān* subtly critiques the notion of technological advancement as inherently positive. The explosion that extinguishes the fire, while hailed as a “magic power,” becomes a symbol of the larger forces at play—forces that are capable of dominating the environment and the people. The film thus critiques industrialization not only for its environmental consequences but also for the way it exploits the local workforce, whose perseverance remains overlooked in the grand narrative of progress. Through his nuanced portrayal of this moment, *Gulistān* highlights the tension between the mythic allure of technology and the human cost it entails, leaving viewers to consider the true price of industrial success.

The film’s poetic voiceover amplifies the emotional weight of the situation. Descriptions of the slow passage of time in the fight against the fire emphasize its long-lasting impact: “Little was gained, Nights passed, Days dawned.” These lines resonate not only as poetic reflections but also as a commentary on the drawn-out consequences for the workers and the surrounding communities. The interplay of sound further emphasizes this juxtaposition, shifting from the terrifying roar of the flames to the peaceful sounds of farmers in the fields. This contrasting soundscape highlights the proximity of the oil industry to the everyday lives of local nomads, who remain disconnected from the industrial struggle but still find themselves affected by it.

The images of the workers harvesting grain, oblivious to the nearby flames, present a haunting reminder of how the oil industry has become an unavoidable part of the lives of these people. The persistence of the fire, which the voiceover describes as something the sheep “grow accustomed to,” mirrors how the locals must accept the presence of the oil industry in their lives, despite the threat it poses. This depiction encapsulates the inescapable nature of industrialization, where those affected have no power to change the course of events.

<sup>27</sup>Parviz Jahed, *Nivishtan bā dūrbin: Rūdarrū bā Ibrāhīm Gulistān* [Writing with the Camera: Face to Face with Ibrāhīm Gulistān] (Tehran: Akhtarān, 2005), 290.

Beyond its depiction of the fire itself, the film subtly gestures toward the socio-economic consequences of Iran's oil industry. While it does not explicitly critique industrialization, *A Fire* captures the ways in which modern oil extraction disrupts traditional communities. Brief glimpses of villagers and farmers displaced by the fire hint at the broader tensions between progress and preservation.<sup>26</sup> This nuanced perspective allows the documentary to function not just as a record of a disaster but as an implicit commentary on Iran's shifting landscape in the mid-20th century.

The editing, undertaken by the renowned Iranian poet Furūgh Farrukhzād, adds a layer of artistic sophistication, elevating the film beyond straightforward reportage. Her careful shot selection and pacing contribute to the film's emotional weight, creating a sense of urgency without resorting to sensationalism. Despite the film's success, controversy emerged regarding authorship: Shāhrukh Gulistān, the film's narrator, initially claimed credit for its creation. However, in a 1961 note to a film journal, Gulistān clarified his vision, emphasizing that the film was an experiment in atmosphere rather than a conventional documentary. He reflected:

Now the film *A Fire* is separate from me, and my friends and I who made it no longer dwell on it. Good or bad, it is finished. We created it as an experiment. Shāhrukh Gulistān had never filmed before, and Furūgh Farrukhzād had never edited a film. We knew our footage depicted a compelling event and did not want to rely solely on this advantage. Many oil wells had caught fire, and many films had been made about them. We aimed to create a different atmosphere, which delayed the film's completion. Now, watching the rainbow arching over the Adriatic is more gratifying than any award or prize.<sup>27</sup>

Premiering at the Tehran Film Center in May 1961 and later showcased at the Venice Film Festival, *A Fire* received critical acclaim, winning the Golden Mercury Award and the Lion of



Saint Mark medals. These awards, prestigious honors in documentary and experimental filmmaking, solidified Gulistān's reputation as a pioneering filmmaker whose work transcended commercial commissions.

<sup>28</sup>Bahrām Bayzā'ī, "Kārnāmāh-yi Film-i Gulistān," *Ārash* 5 (1962): 52.

Critics praised *A Fire* for its innovative blending of documentary realism and artistic expression. Filmmaker Bahram Beyzai, in his article "Gulistān's Film Legacy," described the film as:

This film is an epic of labor, showcasing the terrifying beauty of the towering fire, which was both magnificent and fearsome. The film captures the heroic efforts of unsung heroes amidst the machinery and fire, controlling the inferno. The cameraman's adept location choices, Farrukhzād's skillful shot selection, and the film's honest commentary make *A Fire* the most flawless Iranian film under those conditions.<sup>28</sup>

Despite its achievements, Bayzā'ī noted a certain hesitation in the film's editing and narration, suggesting that it occasionally wavered between an industrial documentary and a more artistic, independent vision. He speculated that this tension may have stemmed from the need to satisfy the oil company's expectations while simultaneously striving for creative autonomy.

Following *A Fire*, Gulistān deepens his exploration of Iran's petroleum modernity with *Wave, Coral, and Rock* (1962), the next installment in the *Perspective* series. While *A Fire* focuses on the raw, violent confrontation between man and nature through the lens of catastrophe and labor, *Wave, Coral, and Rock* shifts toward a more contemplative, visually lyrical mode. It retains Gulistān's signature blend of poetic narration and evocative imagery, but reorients the viewer's attention from immediate disaster to the broader, systemic transformations wrought by oil extraction. Here, the focus lies on the invisible lines—pipelines, geographies, and ecologies—that bind the Iranian plateau to the sea, industry to nature, and progress to erosion. The film expands Gulistān's cinematic vocabulary, offering a philosoph-

<sup>29</sup>Ibrāhīm Gulistān, dir., *Wave, Coral, and Rock* (Mūj, Marjān, va Khārā) (Golestan Film Workshop, 1962), accessed via YouTube, 00:01:59.

ical meditation on technology's imprint on both landscape and consciousness.

The film highlights the striking geological features of Khārک Island, from its coral reefs to its rugged rock formations, while simultaneously confronting the environmental degradation and the broader tension between tradition and modernity. The opening sequence sets the tone for this contrast, as the camera follows an oil tanker approaching the port of Khārک Island. As its anchor descends into the water, it disrupts the tranquility of the marine ecosystem—a visual metaphor for industrial encroachment. The focus then shifts to a fish, an early symbol of the natural world, swimming through an underwater landscape increasingly dominated by human intervention. This poetic contrast is further emphasized by the narrator's existential questioning of the fish, reinforcing the film's meditative exploration of change and disruption.

What is it you look for?

A blossom of the sea? A hue upon the stone?

A gentle light? A pearl from ages past? A time long gone?

Or the deep roots of yesterday and the seeds of a life yet to come?<sup>29</sup>



Figure 3: A mechanical claw holding a large piece of white rock. A still from the film *Wave, Coral, and Rock* (Mūj, Marjān, va Khārā), directed by Ibrāhīm Gulistān, 1962.

Here, Gulistān articulates a nostalgic longing for a pre-industrial past while also questioning the legitimacy of oil-driven progress. The sea and its creatures symbolize a world untainted by human exploitation, yet one that is being irreversibly altered.

While *Wave, Coral, and Rock* was ostensibly commissioned to showcase the engineering marvels of Iran's oil infrastructure, Gulistān subtly embeds a critique of its consequences. The voice-over describes the fish as oblivious to their own impending doom:

In the depths of the sea, they remain untouched by the burdens of thought,

Neither seeking mysteries nor possessing the power to create.

Bound to the fate of their surroundings,

They shape their lives in harmony with their nature.

Yet, a mud from another world drifts upon them endlessly,

Seeping from a hard, restless shell.<sup>30</sup>

This passage employs a layered metaphor: the fish represent the Iranian people who, caught in the overwhelming forces of modernization, are unaware of their gradual subjugation to a foreign-controlled industry. The “mud from another world” alludes to both the literal oil pollution and the figurative encroachment of Western petroleum companies, emphasizing the exploitative nature of Iran's oil economy. The imagery reinforces Gulistān's central concern—oil as a force that transforms landscapes and livelihoods while leaving destruction in its wake.<sup>31</sup>

One of the film's most striking sequences depicts the transformation of Khārk Island. The camera surveys the island's rugged geological formations and coral structures, contrasting them

<sup>30</sup>Ibrāhīm Gulistān, dir., *Wave, Coral, and Rock* (Mūj, Marjān, va Khārā) (Golestan Film Workshop, 1962), accessed via YouTube, 00:02:53.

<sup>31</sup>Roya Khoshnevis, “Crude oil and its false promises of modernization: Petroleum encounters in modern Iranian fiction,” (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2021), 127.

<sup>32</sup>Ibrāhīm Gulistān, dir., *Wave, Coral, and Rock (Mūj, Marjān, va Khārā)* (Golestan Film Workshop, 1962), accessed via YouTube, 00:04:24.

<sup>33</sup>Bahrām Bayzā'ī, "Kārnāmāh-yi Film-i Gulistān," *Ārash* 5 (1962): 55.

with the massive industrial machinery brought in to facilitate oil transportation. As the documentary progresses, scenes of nomadic pastoral life are juxtaposed with the relentless advance of oil pipelines, illustrating the disruption of traditional ways of living. The narrator notes:

Some have left, others have arrived;

The sun has risen and set,

And a place once bustling with life now stands deserted.<sup>32</sup>

This passage encapsulates the alienation and displacement brought about by petroleum modernity. The rapid industrialization of Khārk, once a quiet coral island, is emblematic of how oil-driven development marginalizes indigenous communities. The film emphasizes the irrevocable changes wrought by this transformation, underscoring the environmental and social costs of Iran's oil industry.

In his esteemed critique of Gulistān's cinema, published in *Ārash* magazine, Bahrām Bayzā'ī, one of the most renowned filmmakers, described the documentary's depiction of "the funeral ceremony for the pipe, under the sun, with men in dust-covered face masks" as "poetry—no ordinary poetry, but a strikingly poignant one."<sup>33</sup> Gulistān's signature use of poetic language elevates *Wave, Coral, and Rock* beyond conventional documentary storytelling. The narration, delivered in an elegiac tone, oscillates between reverence for the land's natural history and lamentation for its commodification. This documentary features a beautifully shot sequence of underwater scenes, showcasing vibrant marine life and intricate coral structures. It also includes segments on the island's geological formations, highlighting the dramatic interplay between waves, corals, and rocks. For instance, in one particularly poignant moment, the film juxtaposes images of ancient ruins on Khārk Island with the burgeoning industrial infrastructure, while the narrator in-



vokes the island's historical legacy:

Here lies Khārk, a coral resting beneath the sun,

An ancient companion to the endless waves of time,

Holding within its sturdy heart the memories of distant ages.<sup>34</sup>

This contrast between the past and present highlights Gulistān's critique of the oil industry's erasure of historical and cultural identities. By situating petroleum extraction within a broader historical framework, the documentary suggests that modernity is not a seamless progression but a disruptive force that often disregards heritage and tradition.

Upon its release, *Wave, Coral, and Rock* was widely recognized for its artistic merit, winning a bronze medal at the Venice Film Festival. It was praised for its innovative cinematography, particularly its underwater sequences, which were achieved with minimal equipment but maximum visual impact. Critics have since noted that while the film appears to celebrate Iran's oil industry, its underlying message is far more ambivalent. Hamid Dabashi describes Gulistān's cinematic approach as one that aestheticizes the very industry it critiques, calling his films "beautiful water lilies on the surface of a very dirty swamp."<sup>35</sup>

Gulistān himself later reflected on the documentary's dual nature. In interviews, he acknowledged that although the film was produced with oil company funding, he sought to embed his own perspective, using poetic narration and visual allegory to subvert the dominant industrial narrative.<sup>36</sup> This duality aligns with broader trends in Iranian cinema, where filmmakers navigated corporate and state constraints to introduce critical perspectives. While the documentary ostensibly celebrates oil infrastructure, its true significance lies in its critique of petroleum modernity's disruptions. Through evocative imagery, metaphor-laden narration, and intricate editing, Gulistān captures

<sup>34</sup>Ibrāhīm Gulistān, dir., *Wave, Coral, and Rock* (Mūj, Marjān, va Khārā) (Golestan Film Workshop, 1962), accessed via YouTube, 00:03:20.

<sup>35</sup>Hamid Dabashi, *Masters & Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema* (Mage Publishers, 2007), 78.

<sup>36</sup>Mas'ūd Bihnūd, "Guftugū-yi Mas'ūd Bihnūd va Ibrāhīm Gulistān [Interview with Ibrāhīm Gulistān], BBC Persian, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubAOFYmu\\_VM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubAOFYmu_VM).

<sup>37</sup>Parviz Jahed, "Ibrāhīm Gulistān: Naft va Film-i Mustanad," Phoenix News, August 27, 2023, Accessed July 30, 2024. <https://phoenixnews.ca/ابراهیم-گلستان-نفت-و-فیلم-مستند/>.

<sup>38</sup>Bahrām Bayzā'ī, "Kārnāmah-yi Film-i Gulistān," *Ārash* 5 (1962): 56.

both the marvel and menace of Iran's entanglement with oil, making the film a lasting reference in discussions of Iranian cinema and resource politics.

During the production of this movie, Ibrāhīm Gulistān suffered a broken leg. As a result, one of his English friends, Alan Pendre, who worked for Shell, was sent to oversee the continuation of the project under Gulistān's supervision. However, all the aerial shots that were shot with a helicopter were filmed by Gulistān himself.<sup>37</sup>

Water and Heat is the final installment in Gulistān's acclaimed Perspective series, which spans from 1957 to 1962. Continuing the philosophical and visual inquiries established in *A Fire* and deepened in *Wave*, *Coral*, and *Rock*, this final piece brings Gulistān's meditation on oil, industry, and transformation to its most abstract and elemental level. While the previous films juxtaposed labor, landscape, and infrastructure to reveal the tensions of petroleum modernity, *Water and Heat* distills these themes into their most basic physical forms, suggesting a cosmological dimension to industrial progress.

Bahrām Bayzā'ī remarked on the series' evolution, noting that while it includes instances of repetition and adaptation of others' work—an understandable phase in the creative process—the series as a whole demonstrates significant technical and artistic development. Despite these advancements, Bayzā'ī observed that the series often struggled to fully translate poetic ideas into visual imagery. He highlighted that while the series sometimes relied on narration to maintain its artistic integrity, it was this literary script that often saved the films from falling short.<sup>38</sup> Despite these critiques, *Water and Heat* exemplifies Gulistān's skill in balancing documentary realism with lyrical abstraction, solidifying his role in shaping the language of Iranian documentary cinema.

If the Perspective series traces the trajectory of Iran's entan-



glements with oil—from extraction and catastrophe to ecological disruption and elemental forces—then *The Hills of Mārlik* (1963) offers a poignant counterpoint, redirecting Gulistān’s lens from the modern industrial present to the ancient, archaeological past. While formally distinct from the Perspective films, *The Hills of Mārlik* maintains Gulistān’s signature approach: poetic narration, meditative pacing, and a deep concern with the relationship between humanity and its environment. Where *Wave*, *Coral*, and *Rock* explored the erosion of traditional lifeways by petroleum modernity, *The Hills of Mārlik* evokes a civilization long gone, unearthed from the soil rather than buried beneath oil pipelines. The thematic shift—from destruction to discovery, from displacement to remembrance—marks a natural progression in Gulistān’s evolving cinematic inquiry into time, landscape, and legacy.

The film’s opening sequence immediately establishes its philosophical tone. The sound of the Sifid-Rūd, one of Iran’s longest rivers, approximately 670 kilometers (416 miles) long, originating in the Alburz mountain range, fills the screen, accompanying the image of a man carefully reassembling the broken fragments of an ancient clay pot, setting a reflective tone that connects ancient artifacts with the present, which are “portrayed not merely as historical objects but as representations of a lost civilization’s world and its hidden truths.”<sup>39</sup> By juxtaposing historical and contemporary images, the film explores the continuity and creativity of human life. Gulistān’s narration, blending rhythmic prose with evocative imagery, creates a surreal atmosphere that invites viewers into a dreamlike journey through time.<sup>40</sup> The narrator, whose voice shifts between past and present, engages the audience in a dialogue, highlighting the immortality of ancient artifacts.<sup>41</sup> The film contrasts with modern documentaries, which often focus on interviews and live-action scenes, by blending reality and imagination to explore ancient history.

<sup>39</sup>Pūyā Janānī, “Jaryān-i Hastī dar Tappah’hā-yi Mārlik-i Gulistān [The Flow of Existence in Gulistān’s Mārlik Hills],” *Cine Eye*, April 2020. Accessed July 30, 2024. <https://cine-eye.net/> = سینما تجزیہ - مستند / جریان - / هستی - در تپہ های مارلیک - گلستان

<sup>40</sup>Mansūr Pūyān, “Tappah’hā-yi Mārlik: Mustanadī Shā’irānah [Mārlik Hills: A Poetic Documentary],” *Nāfah Monthly* 12, no. 45 (2011): 88.

<sup>41</sup>Mansūr Pūyān, “Tappah’hā-yi Mārlik: Mustanadī Shā’irānah [Mārlik Hills: A Poetic Documentary],” *Nāfah Monthly* 12, no. 45 (2011): 89.

<sup>42</sup>Ibrāhīm Gulistān, dir., *The Hills of Mārlik* (*Tappah'hā-yi Mārlik*) (Golestan Film Workshop, 1963), accessed via Aparat, 00:01:17.



Figure 4: A man carefully reassembling the fragments of an ancient clay pot by the Sifid-Rūd river. A still from the film *The Hills of Mārlik* (*Tappah'hā-yi Mārlik*), directed by Ibrāhīm Gulistān, 1963.

This seemingly simple act carries profound symbolic weight: it is a visual metaphor for reconstructing history, piecing together the remnants of a lost civilization in an attempt to understand its past. The accompanying narration sets the film's temporal and poetic framework:

This year,

last year,

thousands upon thousands of years,

Carried by the wind, the scent of pine's timelessness. . .<sup>42</sup>

This recurring phrase establishes *The Hills of Mārlik* as a film deeply concerned with temporality. The past and present do not exist as separate entities but as intertwined forces shaping human existence. Gulistān's repetition of these words throughout the film underscores the cyclical nature of history, where civilizations rise and fall, leaving behind fragments—both material and cultural—that continue to speak across time. Another theme in the film is “creativity,” portrayed as timeless, spanning



from the distant past to the present. Gulistān's narration suggests that creativity exists in various forms—within the soil, in people like trees with deep roots, and in women. This theme intertwines creativity with fertility, nature with society, and blurs the line between the artisanal (ancient artifacts) and the artistic.<sup>43</sup>

By embracing a style of “creative ambiguity,” the film draws viewers into an interpretive experience that goes beyond traditional documentary storytelling. Instead of being passive recipients of information, viewers become part of the narrative flow, invited them to imagine ancient histories and meanings. Gulistān employs ‘darkness and close-ups of ancient artifacts to evoke a dreamlike, immersive experience, compelling viewers to accept the film’s aesthetic ambiguity and stop attempting to decode it’.<sup>44</sup>

The film’s “museum display sequences” highlight Gulistān’s montage virtuosity beyond the realm of verbal narration. These sequences feature sharply the excavated objects, suspended in the air, filmed from various angles and distances against an immaculately black background. By employing a range of cinematic techniques—including jump cuts, traveling shots, extreme close-ups, stop-motion cinematography, dissolves, and fades—Gulistān constructs a mesmerizing visual experience that blurs the boundaries between historical documentation and poetic imagination.<sup>45</sup> These artifacts are not merely static exhibits; they appear almost ethereal, as if floating through time.

<sup>43</sup>Farbod Honarparisheh, “Fragmented Allegories of National Authenticity: Art and Politics of the Iranian New Wave Cinema, 1960-79,” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2016), 83.

<sup>44</sup>Pūyā Janānī, “Jaryān-i Hastī dar Tappah’hā-yi Mārīk-i Gulistān [The Flow of Existence in Gulistān’s Mārīk Hills],” *Cine Eye*, April 2020. Accessed July 30, 2024. <https://cine-eye.net/=سینما تجریمی مستند/جریان-هستی-در-تپه-های-مارلیک-گلستان/>.

<sup>45</sup>Farbod Honarparisheh, “Fragmented Allegories of National Authenticity: Art and Politics of the Iranian New Wave Cinema, 1960-79,” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2016), 82.

<sup>46</sup>Ibrāhīm Gulistān, dir., *The Hills of Mārlik* (*Tappah'hā-yi Mārlik*) (Golestan Film Workshop, 1963), accessed via Aparat, 00:05:57.



Figure 5: A close-up of an ancient deer-like artifact, illuminated against a dark background in a museum display sequence. A still from the film *The Hills of Mārlik* (*Tappah'hā-yi Mārlik*), directed by Ibrāhīm Gulistān, 1963.

Additionally, Gulistān juxtaposes these “museum pieces” with images of villagers standing in front of their mud-brick homes, creating an unexpected contrast between ancient artifacts and contemporary rural life. This interplay produces a collage-like quality that reinforces the film’s meditation on historical continuity and rupture. The blackness of the background, combined with Gulistān’s evocative narration, weaves these fragmented elements into a cohesive visual and conceptual experience, urging the audience to find meaning in the interplay of past and present.

History was lost,

the cast turned to dust,

and the mind that once held thought is no more...<sup>46</sup>

Reminiscent of ancient ruins, the excavated skeletons, the museum artifacts, and the voice-over narration all point to a long process of destruction and decay. The voice-over suggests that this collapse may have been triggered by external invasion, a



“tribe,” an “evil idea,” or a “deceiving tyrant.” However, amidst this depiction of decline, Gulistān offers a vision of renewal.<sup>47</sup> This voiceover also challenges the viewer to consider the role of civilization itself. At one point, he reflects on the potential causes of Mārlik’s decline: “Perhaps fear of an external force... a tribe, an evil idea, a deceitful tyrant?”

These words subtly critique not just ancient history but also contemporary political realities. The documentary, while supposedly about an ancient site, resonates with Gulistān’s critique of modern Iran, particularly the Pahlavī regime’s modernization efforts, which often disregarded historical and cultural continuity in favor of imposed Westernization. By evoking the idea of external and internal forces leading to decay, Gulistān draws a parallel between past empires and the socio-political conditions of his own time. His poetic narration invokes the hope of revival, of an ancient civilization reawakening from the depths of time.

This documentary, influenced by the subject of “the death of a civilization,” is a tangible poem that envisions the re-emergence of an ancient civilization in dreams and ends with a question, accepting the gap between ambiguity and reality. “Mārlik Hills” was neither a fleeting phenomenon nor an event that abruptly faced a dead end. Besides its unique features in language, style, technique, and structure, this documentary reacts to social events and challenges the modernization program of the Pahlavī regime from a different perspective.<sup>48</sup>

May the ancient roots bloom once more!

May the god of seed bless the valley!

May the eyes behold! and in their seeing, may life be reborn.<sup>49</sup>

This closing passage transforms the film from a lamentation into an invocation of hope. The past, rather than being a mere

<sup>47</sup>Farbod Honarpisheh, “Fragmented Allegories of National Authenticity: Art and Politics of the Iranian New Wave Cinema, 1960-79,” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2016), 96.

<sup>48</sup>Mansūr Pūyān, “Tappah-hā-yi Mārlik: Mustanadī Shā’irānah [Mārlik Hills: A Poetic Documentary],” *Nāfah Monthly* 12, no. 45 (2011): 88.

<sup>49</sup>Ibrāhīm Gulistān, dir., *The Hills of Mārlik (Tappah’hā-yi Mārlik)* (Golestan Film Workshop, 1963), accessed via Aparat, 00:13:44.

relic, contains within it the seeds of renewal. By ending on this note, Gulistān suggests that cultural heritage is not only something to be remembered but something that can inspire and shape the future.

In conclusion, *The Hills of Mārlik* stands as a groundbreaking work in Iranian poetic cinema, blending visual storytelling with philosophical and historical reflection. Gulistān's innovative use of poetic narration, symbolic imagery, and modernist cinematic techniques transforms the documentary into a meditation on time, civilization, and artistic expression. The film not only constructs an extinct civilization but envisions its potential revival, challenging the viewer to engage with history in a dynamic, rather than static, way. Through its abstract and metaphorical approach, it invites audiences to rethink their relationship with the past, recognizing its ongoing influence on the present. The 2019 restoration reaffirms the film's enduring significance, solidifying its place as one of the most important works in Iranian cinema.



Figure 6: A hand presenting a highly ornamented, jeweled object. A still from the film *The Crown Jewels of Iran* (*Ganjīnah-hā-yi Gawhar*), directed by Ibrāhīm Gulistān, 1965.

If *The Hills of Mārlik* looked to the earth for remnants of lost civilizations, meditating on time and the creative spirit embedded in history, *The Crown Jewels of Iran* (*Ganjīnah-hā-yi Gawhar*, 1965) turns its gaze upward—toward glittering artifacts preserved not in soil but in vaults, protected by the very regime that commissioned their display. Like *Wave*, *Coral*, and *Rock and The Hills of Mārlik*, this film reflects Gulistān’s complex engagement with the symbols of power and the legacies of civilization. Yet here, the tone is more ambivalent: commissioned by the Central Bank of Iran to commemorate the Shah’s 25th anniversary, *The Crown Jewels of Iran* was ostensibly designed to glorify the monarchy through its possession of the Iranian crown jewels. Instead, Gulistān repurposes the project into a visually intricate, philosophically charged inquiry into the nature of wealth, spectacle, and sovereignty. While jewels dazzle the eye, the narration—subtle, ironic, and layered—suggests a deeper tension between material display and historical truth. In this way, *The Crown Jewels of Iran* continues Gulistān’s pattern of poetic subversion: working within the constraints of official commissions, he crafts films that both fulfill and resist their institutional origins. The narration begins with an observation: “Here is the jewel vault at the Central Bank of Iran. This treasure of abundance and preciousness is unparalleled.”<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Ibrāhīm Gulistān, dir., *The Crown Jewels of Iran* (*Ganjīnah-ha-ye Gohar*), (Golestan Film Studio, 1965), 00:01:11.

This framing device initiates an associative process, wherein the jewels become more than artifacts; they function as nodes in a network of meaning, linking wealth to authority, tradition to legitimacy. Yet, as the film unfolds, this static representation destabilizes. However, Gulistān employs a dynamic audiovisual structure that subtly disrupts this initial impression. The documentary’s rhythm plays a crucial role in shaping cognitive engagement. In the early sequences, a steady quadruple-meter soundtrack underscores the weight and legacy of the monarchy. Objects—plates, teapots, and chests—are presented as immutable symbols of power. But as the film progresses, the rhythm transitions to a waltz, a triple meter, introducing an embodied sense of instability. This shift, much like a change in

<sup>51</sup>Ibrāhīm Gulistān, dir., *The Treasures of the Jewel* (Ganjīnah-hā-yi Gawhar) (Golestan Film Studio, 1965), 00:12:26.

cognitive framing, primes the viewer for a re-evaluation of the images.

This rhythmic pattern reinforces a schema of order, permanence, and grandeur. However, Gulistān disrupts this pattern through a shift to a waltz, a triple-meter that introduces instability:

Glory and greatness in history

never grew from the glow

of gold or emeralds.

Never the brilliance of diamonds

guaranteed the life of a nation.<sup>51</sup>

The waltz introduces a perceptual shift—once perceived as symbols of continuity, the jewels now signify transience. The change in rhythm subtly reconfigures the audience’s cognitive processing, leading them from a sense of stability to an awareness of fragility.

By embedding these cognitive shifts in the interplay of music, imagery, and narration, Gulistān transforms a documentary on jewels into an intricate mental exercise, guiding the viewer through layers of perception. Gulistān’s integration of sound with visual elements is not only a technical achievement but also a form of storytelling in itself. The music functions as a counterpoint to the imagery of the crown jewels. The jewels, ostensibly markers of wealth, function as metaphors—objects that activate deeper associations beyond their immediate visual presence. Their brilliance and abundance initially suggest sovereignty and control, yet their presentation also evokes absence. A striking moment in the narration emphasizes what is missing:

These stones never represented



the prosperity of a people.  
Each one of these pricey pebbles is  
a page of the life of the people of Iran.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup>Ibrāhīm Gulistān, dir., *The Treasures of the Jewel (Ganjīnah-hā-yi Gawhar)* (Golestan Film Studio, 1965), 00:12:42.

This passage prompts a conceptual reframing—the jewels, initially perceived as complete and immutable, transform into markers of loss and displacement. The human mind, inclined toward pattern recognition, fills in these absences, drawing attention away from the physicality of the jewels toward the social realities they obscure. The viewer is no longer simply observing treasures but engaging in a reconstructive act, imagining the unspoken histories concealed within their radiance.

The contrast between presence and absence shifts the viewer's attention from what is displayed to what is missing, turning the jewels from mere objects of admiration into silent witnesses of history. The idea that absence itself tells a story disrupts the conventional perception of wealth as permanence, instead linking it to displacement and loss. The rhythmic shifts in the music mirror this tension, reinforcing the sense of an unstable political order beneath the surface of opulence. The jewels, while representing wealth and power, also act as metaphors for political control and the monarchy's hold over Iran. Through these elements, the film subtly unsettles the viewer's perception, prompting an awareness of the contradictions embedded within the grandeur it presents. Gulistān's storytelling layers these visual and auditory cues, allowing the audience to engage with both the explicit and the unspoken narratives woven into the imagery.

The documentary further employs metaphorical inversion to challenge ingrained cognitive associations. Wealth, typically aligned with security and permanence, is reframed in a passage that juxtaposes material riches with intellectual and social progress:

The treasures of yesterday's gems have become today a guar-

<sup>53</sup>Ibrāhīm Gulistān, dir., *The Crown Jewels of Iran (Ganjīnah-hā-yi Gawhar)* (Golestan Film Studio, 1965), 00:13:12.

<sup>54</sup>Yūsuf Latīfipūr, “Mustanādī kih faqat Shāh ān rā dīd; marammat-i Ganjīnah-hā-yi Gawhar-i Ibrāhīm Gulistān,” *BBC Persian*, May 8, 2021, Accessed August 23, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/arts-57027584>.

antee of money.

Today’s country of wealth means the richness of the living.

Today, power means thinking.<sup>53</sup>

This duality between celebration and critique captures the essence of the regime’s paradoxical nature—on one hand, a symbol of prosperity, and on the other, a system on the brink of transformation due to internal contradictions.<sup>54</sup> This reversal compels the audience to update their framework: jewels cease to be static symbols of power and instead become fluid markers of shifting value systems. The monarchic paradigm, which links authority to material display, is implicitly undermined by the notion that true power is dynamic, residing in intellect and adaptability rather than in immutable artifacts.

In *The Crown Jewels of Iran*, Gulistān does more than document historical artifacts; he orchestrates a cognitive shift in the viewer’s perception of power and permanence. Through rhythmic manipulation, strategic absences, and the interplay of sound and image, the film destabilizes the assumed grandeur of the monarchy, turning symbols of stability into precursors of transformation. The jewels, initially framed as emblems of opulence and legitimacy, gradually reveal themselves as silent witnesses to historical erosion. As the film’s rhythm shifts—from measured stability to an unsettled waltz—the audience is subtly guided through a transformation in understanding, where grandeur dissolves into fragility, and permanence gives way to transience. By intertwining sensory elements with narrative subversion, Gulistān’s documentary transcends historical commentary, becoming an active force in reshaping how history itself is perceived.

### **Narrative Filmmaking**

Gulistān’s transition from documentary to narrative cinema did



not mark a break from his earlier concerns but rather an evolution of them. His documentaries had already revealed his fascination with time, power, and the aesthetics of interpretation. These films blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction, inviting viewers to think critically about Iran's past and present through visual metaphor and poetic narration. In many ways, Gulistān's entry into narrative filmmaking extended this sensibility into new territory. Rather than adopting the dominant modes of melodrama or escapist entertainment prevalent in Iranian popular cinema, Gulistān's narrative work continued to interrogate modernity, alienation, and political consciousness.

The 1960s was a decade of rapid transformation in Iranian cinema, with production output and institutional support expanding significantly. The establishment of the College of Dramatic Arts in 1963 and the rise of film festivals provided fertile ground for experimentation. Amid this cinematic reawakening, Gulistān's *Brick and Mirror* (1965) emerged as a landmark in Iranian narrative film—an introspective, noir-inflected exploration of moral uncertainty and existential disorientation in an urbanizing Tehran. Just as *The Hills of Mārlik* uncovered buried histories and *The Crown Jewels of Iran* probed the glittering facades of royal power, *Brick and Mirror* turned its gaze to the psychological and social ruptures of contemporary life.

Gulistān's entry into narrative cinema began not with *Brick and Mirror* but with *Courtship* (*Khāstagārī*, 1962), a short fiction film that laid the groundwork for many of the themes he would later explore more fully. As his first narrative work, *Courtship* reflects Gulistān's evolving cinematic language—one still rooted in documentary realism, yet increasingly concerned with dramatizing the tensions between tradition and modernity. Set in early 1960s Iran, the film offers a sharply observed portrayal of traditional marriage customs through the story of Hasan, a young worker at an ornamental ironworks, who seeks to marry Rubābah. The courtship unfolds through formal negotiations between Hasan's mother and Rubābah's father, the Hājī, empha-

sizing the ritualistic and hierarchical nature of family involvement in marriage. In this context, personal desire is secondary to collective expectations and social conformity.



Figure 7: Women during a traditional marriage negotiation. A still from the film *Courtship* (*Khāstagārī*), directed by Ibrāhīm Gulistān, 1962.

While modest in scale, *Courtship* prefigures *Brick* and *Mirror* in its quiet interrogation of societal structures and its sensitivity to unspoken emotional tensions. Both films share a concern with the limits of individual agency within rigid social frameworks—whether it is the family unit or the broader modernizing state. In *Courtship*, Hasan is praised not for his emotional connection to Rubābah but for being “good, sincere, and thrifty,” attributes that signal his economic and moral suitability more than his personal desires. This emphasis on socially sanctioned virtue foreshadows *Brick* and *Mirror*’s deeper exploration of alienation, moral ambiguity, and the existential burden of choice.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the portrayal of the courtship process, which is defined more by ritual and hierarchy than by emotional intimacy. The narrative centers on a formal exchange between Hasan’s mother and Rubābah’s father, the Hājī—a man of notable social standing—through which the



marriage negotiations are initiated. The dialogue underscores how personal qualities are evaluated through a collective lens.

The film also underscores the rigid gender roles of the time, with women remaining largely in the background. As Hasan's mother and sister navigate the proposal process, they are actively involved in maintaining the family's reputation: "The mother tells her to serve the visitors first." This moment demonstrates how women's actions were tightly linked to the social standing of their families. The women's role is not only to be present but to facilitate and reinforce the formalities of the courtship.

A pivotal scene in the film revolves around the orchestrated "chance" meeting between Hasan and Rubābah. While it is framed as an unscripted moment, every aspect of the encounter is meticulously planned. The father's reluctance to allow Rubābah to meet Hasan reflects the patriarchal authority that governs the family. "You must appear very reluctant to let his daughter be seen by a strange man," the father says, heightening the formality and tension of the situation. This careful control over the interaction highlights how every aspect of courtship was steeped in tradition and expected social behavior.

Hasan and Rubābah's interaction is polite but formal, a product of societal expectations rather than personal affection. "They're casual and express polite thanks, but actually they're inspecting her very closely." The physical distance between the two is indicative of the societal norms that dictate a more reserved approach to intimacy and affection. This scene emphasizes that the purpose of the meeting is not to assess personal chemistry but to maintain the decorum expected of such a serious and publicly observed occasion.

When the father finally grants his blessing, it is not a simple personal approval but a communal decision that reflects the collective expectations of both families. The decision-making process is lengthy and methodical, reinforcing the importance

<sup>55</sup>Carlo Celli, *National Identity in Global Cinema* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 76.

<sup>56</sup>Oliver Leaman, ed. *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film* (Routledge, 2001), 145.

of deliberation within the family structure. “Finally, the father grants his blessing, saying, ‘I hope you will both grow old together,’” which is less an expression of personal affection than a ritualistic conclusion to a process shaped by social norms.

Through these carefully orchestrated interactions, *Courtship* provides a lens into the societal and familial expectations that governed courtship in Iran during the 1960s. The film presents marriage not as a union of two individuals but as a formal agreement between families. Every gesture, conversation, and decision is framed within the context of duty, social standing, and tradition. The structured, almost ritualistic nature of the courtship process, as seen through Hasan and Rubābah’s interactions, illustrates the deep-rooted customs that shaped personal relationships in Iranian society at the time. In doing so, *Courtship* sets the stage for *Gulistān*’s more radical narrative turn in *Brick and Mirror* (1965), which expanded on these themes with a more experimental and introspective style. Officially recognized as a foundational work of the Iranian New Wave, *Brick and Mirror* departed from traditional narrative formulas by embracing ambiguity, realism, and philosophical inquiry. Where *Courtship* subtly critiques the constraints of social custom, *Brick and Mirror* magnifies them within a broader urban and existential context—signaling *Gulistān*’s full immersion into a cinematic language that echoed the depth and disquiet of modern human experience. This movie developed “a tradition of Iranian films that took simple stories, in an echo of art cinema, to present human drama.”<sup>55</sup> *Gulistān*’s first fiction film is “an intriguing urban melodrama, were subjected to censorship and to public apathy, as the public’s taste had been conditioned by glossy foreign films and formulaic local productions.”<sup>56</sup>

This drama follows Hāshim, a taxi driver in Tehran who discovers an abandoned baby in his cab after a young woman exits. As Hāshim and his girlfriend, Tājī, grapple with the moral and emotional implications of the child’s sudden arrival, their differing views come into sharp conflict: Hāshim wishes to aban-



don the baby, while Tājī is determined to keep it. The ‘baby ultimately becomes a symbol of hope and a positive force in the taxi driver’s life’.<sup>57</sup> Set against the backdrop of a rapidly modernizing Tehran, the film explores the social and emotional challenges faced by its characters. Gulistān uses the taxi driver’s encounters with his friends, a chaotic range of neighbors, and his interactions with the police and legal system to satirize the intellectual elite and highlight the failings of the state. The film’s portrayal of everyday life is interwoven with ironic commentary on mass media and superficial entertainment, emphasizing the disconnection between personal lives and political realities.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup>Blake Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 128.

<sup>58</sup>Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978* (Duke University Press, 2011), 127-128.

<sup>59</sup>Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978* (Duke University Press, 2011), 360.



Figure 8: An abandoned baby wrapped in cloth, held in a woman’s hand. A still from the film *Brick and Mirror* (*Khesht va Āyeneh*), directed by Ibrāhīm Gulistān, 1965.

*Brick and Mirror* is distinguished by its existential themes and modernist approach. The film offers a profound exploration of societal disintegration and existential uncertainty, questioning the human tendency to seek external saviors. Tājī’s desire to keep the baby reflects her belief that the child’s arrival has strengthened her bond with Hāshim, whereas Hāshim remains reluctant, underscoring the film’s deep engagement with themes of hope, connection, and personal conflict.<sup>59</sup> Gulistān’s reflection on human autonomy echoes these themes. In his interview,

<sup>60</sup>Ignatiy Vishnevetsky, "The Brick and the Mirror / Selected Answers from Ebrahim Gulistan," *Sounds, Images*, May 7, 2007. Accessed June 22, 2025, <https://soundsimages.blogspot.com/2007/05/brick-and-mirror-selected-answers-from.html>.

he emphasized the need for self-reliance and the rejection of external saviors, illustrating how individuals must confront their struggles alone, without the expectation of a rescuer. As he explains:

And still it so happens a kid, this baby, is brought in. Towards the end of the film, the girl is telling the man: "We got together and I thought that my life and your life was saved because of that little girl, that baby and I thought that she is a link, she is our savior and now you have snatched her away from me. Now I have to rely on myself, I know that it is me, the human being, who is responsible for his own life. [I] should save [myself] without any help from anybody..."<sup>60</sup>

This resonates with *Brick and Mirror*'s exploration of personal responsibility, as both Hāshim and Tājī wrestle with their individual choices and their shared moral dilemma. Gulistān's use of visual symbolism further reinforces these existential struggles. The repetitive imagery of mirrors and reflections throughout the film serves as a metaphor for self-examination and duality, questioning the gap between personal identity and societal roles. Hāshim's reluctance to keep the baby is not just a rejection of responsibility but a broader refusal to confront his own vulnerabilities and uncertainties. The taxi's confined space symbolizes Hāshim's entrapment in his own existential crisis, mirroring the larger social stagnation of Iran during that period.

Drawing inspiration from a poem by 'Attār— "What the old can see in a mud-brick/Youth can see in a mirror"—Gulistān's debut film weaves together dreams and reality, offering a critique of Iran's shifting social landscape, the intellectual elite's failures, and widespread corruption. It also marks a significant milestone in Iranian cinema as the first film to use direct sound, with a deliberate emphasis on environmental noises, further intensified by the absence of a musical score, and complemented by the claustrophobic feel of widescreen composition.



Jonathan Rosenbaum views Ibrāhīm Gulistān's *Brick and Mirror* as a groundbreaking film within the Iranian New Wave, notable for its blend of modernist and existential elements<sup>61</sup>. He praises the film for its innovative use of direct sound and lack of traditional musical scoring, which, combined with its neorealist surface, underscores its deeper expressionist and metaphysical themes. The film, *Brick and Mirror*, employs a modernist approach characterized by its use of dialogic theory and existential themes. It integrates

Diverse voices and perspectives, reflecting the complexities of truth and identity without adhering to a singular, authoritative viewpoint. This fragmented, dialogic structure allows the audience to engage with multiple meanings and interpretations, highlighting the ambiguity and fragmentation inherent in human experience.<sup>62</sup>

Gulistān's dialogues, particularly the exchanges between Hāshim and Tājī, serve as indicators of internal conflict and moral ambiguity. For instance, in a pivotal scene, Hāshim, grappling with his own fears, tells Tājī: "This isn't my problem. I didn't ask for this," to which Tājī responds: "You don't ask for life, Hāshim. It just arrives."<sup>63</sup>

This brief yet intense exchange reveals Hāshim's resistance to responsibility versus Tājī's acceptance of fate and moral duty. This interplay between agency and determinism is a recurring theme, emphasizing the cognitive dissonance in Hāshim's character development.

Furthermore, the film's interplay between light and shadow enhances its themes of moral ambiguity. Gulistān's cinematography frequently places Hāshim in half-lit environments, symbolizing his wavering convictions and uncertain path. The stark contrast between Tājī's illuminated face and Hāshim's shadowed profile visually encapsulates their ideological divide, reinforcing the film's psychological depth.

<sup>61</sup>Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Ebrahim Golestan's Epic Tragedy of the 60s: BRICK AND MIRROR," [jonathanrosenbaum.net](https://jonathanrosenbaum.net), November 8, 2024. Accessed June 18, 2025, <https://jonathanrosenbaum.net/2024/11/ebrahim-golestans-epic-tragedy-of-the-60s-brick-and-mirror-tk/>.

<sup>62</sup>Assadallāh Ghulām-'Alī and 'Alī Shaykh Mahdī, "Mantiq-i mukālamah dar film-i Khisht u Āyinah (1343) [Dialogism in the Movie of the Brick and Mirror (1965)]," *Nashriyah-yi Hunar'hā-yi Zībā* 22, no. 2 (2017): 137-145.

<sup>63</sup>Ibrāhīm Gulistān, dir., *Brick and Mirror* (Khesht va Āyeneh) (Golestan Film Workshop, 1965).

<sup>64</sup>Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Ebrahim Golestan's Epic Tragedy of the 60s: BRICK AND MIRROR," *jonathan-rosenbaum.net*, November 8, 2024. Accessed June 18, 2025, <https://jonathanrosenbaum.net/2024/11/ebrahim-golestans-epic-tragedy-of-the-60s-brick-and-mirror-tk/>.

<sup>65</sup>Vahīd-Allāh Mūsavī, Mahdī Pūrrizā'iyān, Muhammad Shahbā, and Sayyid-'Alī Rūhānī, "Sabk va Zhānr dar Sīnimā-yi Hunarī-i Īrān (Murīdkāvī-i Fīlm'hā-yi Khīshī va Ayneh, Siyāvash dar Takht-i Jamshīd)," *Nāmāh-yi Hunar'hā-yi Namāyishī va Mūsīqī* (Fall and Winter 2017): 90.

<sup>66</sup>Hamid Dabashi, *Masters & Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema* (Mage Publishers, 2007), 102.

Rosenbaum highlights the film's critical examination of societal and intellectual hypocrisy through its portrayal of Tehran and its institutions, positioning it as a significant achievement in Iranian cinema.<sup>64</sup> He views it as a profound critique of contemporary life, comparable in ambition to European cinema of the same era, and a major contribution to global filmmaking. The film's portrayal of a society in turmoil critiques oppression, injustice, and identity crises, enriching the viewer's understanding of the characters' inner conflicts.

The film's social commentary critiques the challenges and complexities of modernization in Iranian society, offering a deep and introspective view of its protagonists' psychological turmoil and evolving relationships. It employs a closed situation drama with circular narrative elements and random encounters reinforcing the sense of confinement.<sup>65</sup> Characters experience alienation and lack meaningful motivation, reflecting broader themes of modern cinema. In the film's climax, parallel editing reveals the characters' helplessness against larger, unseen forces. The woman's encounter with children in the orphanage and the man's realization of societal hypocrisy highlight their despair and alienation. Unlike classic melodramas with hopeful resolutions, the film emphasizes the characters' inability to overcome pervasive, invisible crises, resulting in a profound sense of existential defeat. The film's blend of melodrama and social critique, culminating in the taxi driver's aimless wandering after being abandoned by his girlfriend, reflects a profound sense of disillusionment and instability in the nation.

Hamid Dabashi's view on *Brick and Mirror* highlights its profound impact on Iranian cinema and its unique artistic achievements. Based on his view, "unlike Farrokh Ghaffari, who was deeply influenced by European cinema, Golestan was a major literary figure in Persia, which deeply influenced his approach to filmmaking."<sup>66</sup> Although *Brick and Mirror* was a commercial and critical failure upon its release, its innovative blend of realism and surrealism, coupled with its deep literary foundations,



has since established it as a pioneering work in Iranian cinema. Gulistān's ability to transform Persian literary aesthetics into a visual medium, despite the film's initial lack of public and critical appreciation, marks it as a significant contribution to the evolution of Iranian cinema.

Moreover, Gulistān's innovative approach combines radical politics with formal creativity, offering a compelling and unique vision of Iran on the cusp of the 1970s.<sup>67</sup> *Brick and Mirror* is a cornerstone of the Iranian New Wave, a cinematic movement that emerged in the 1970s. As noted by Farrukh Ghaffārī, "Brick and Mirror and its contemporaries played a crucial role in shaping the new direction of Iranian film, establishing a foundation for future cinematic innovations".<sup>68</sup> Gulistān's innovative style and thematic exploration have left a lasting impact on Iranian film aesthetics, establishing *Brick and Mirror* as a critical piece in the evolution of Iranian cinema.

Following *Brick and Mirror*, Gulistān continued to expand the thematic and stylistic boundaries of Iranian cinema with *The Secrets of the Treasure of the Jinn Valley* (1973), released in 1974 alongside a book of the same name authored by Gulistān himself. While *Brick and Mirror* delved into existential uncertainty and urban alienation, *Jinn Valley* marks a turn toward biting political satire and social critique, filtered through the lens of dark humor. Set against the backdrop of pre-revolutionary Iran, the film offers a scathing commentary on modernization and its discontents, targeting the newly affluent, pseudo-intellectuals, opportunistic artists, and even the monarchy. The Shah is portrayed as a grotesque caricature obsessed with oil and opulence, exemplifying Gulistān's anti-establishment sensibility.<sup>69</sup> Yet, true to his style, Gulistān refrains from proposing a clear ideological solution, instead exposing the absurdities and contradictions of the status quo. *Jinn Valley* stands as a daring and intellectually charged continuation of Gulistān's cinematic project—one that blends literary depth, formal experimentation, and radical critique to probe the soul of a society on the

<sup>67</sup>Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978* (Duke University Press, 2011), 127-128.

<sup>68</sup>Parviz Jahed, ed. *Directory of World Cinema: Iran* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2012), 30.

<sup>69</sup>Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978* (Duke University Press, 2011), 155.

brink of upheaval.

The film begins with construction workers building a road in a small village, where a peasant, 'Alī, a rural farmer portrayed by Parvīz Sayyād, accidentally uncovers a vast treasure while plowing his field. Believing the wealth will liberate him from poverty, he spends it on luxury items that are incongruous with his reality. This moment signifies a shift for 'Alī, whose perception of wealth as a tool for freedom is immediately distorted by his environment. His mindset is conditioned by his limited experience, leading him to misunderstand prosperity as excess rather than stability. This newfound wealth leads him to indulge in a lavish lifestyle, attracting the attention of various individuals, including antique buyers and villagers, all of whom become involved in the search for the treasure's origin. Encouraged by a jeweler and his wife, the peasant becomes increasingly disconnected from his former life, marrying a servant girl and buying extravagant but impractical goods.



Figure 9: The peasant, 'Alī, conversing with a jeweler over a counter displaying various pieces of jewelry. A still from the film *The Secrets of the Treasure of the Jinn Valley*, directed by Ibrāhīm Gulistān, 1973.



The transformation of ‘Alī is evident in his dialogue, which shifts from simple peasant expressions to exaggerated declarations of grandeur. At one point, he exclaims, “Now I am a man of status! Who dares to question my worth?” This conflict illustrates how rapid shifts in socioeconomic status disrupt an individual’s identity, forcing them to reconcile their past with an imagined future. The more ‘Alī indulges, the more he distances himself from his origins, losing sight of his initial motivations.

As his wealth attracts the greed of others, including a gendarme and a café owner, the treasure becomes the focal point of a power struggle. The narrative reaches a dramatic climax during a grand wedding celebration when ‘Alī’s opulent mansion is destroyed by an explosion caused by road construction. The destruction leaves ‘Alī isolated and disillusioned, highlighting the superficial nature and consequences of his sudden affluence. His final moments in the film are filled with fragmented thoughts, verbalizing his confusion: “It was all here, I had it, and now... nothing!” This breakdown illustrates cognitive overload—his inability to process the reality of his downfall.

Directed and edited by Ibrāhīm Gulistān, with music by Farhād Mishkāt and sculptures by Kāvah Gulistān, the film faced significant controversy upon its release. Gulistān’s film, a follow-up to his critically acclaimed *The Brick and the Mirror* (1964), was produced during a period of economic growth and political corruption in Iran.

It critiques the Shah’s authoritarian modernization and superficial reforms through a satirical lens, using allegorical elements to address issues such as the Shah’s 2500-year celebrations and foreign contracts, symbolizing Iran’s oil wealth and the regime’s corruption. The treasure itself is an illusion—much like the promises of the Pahlavī government. Gulistān uses cognitive framing to juxtapose the dream of wealth with the realities of exploitation. Banned by the Shah’s regime after a brief screening in 1974 due to its subversive content and criticism

<sup>70</sup>Abbas Milani, "Asrār-i 'Asrār-i Ganj-i Darrah-yi Jinnī.' Ravāyat' hā-yi Mutafāvit az Tawqīf-i Yak Film," BBC Persian, September 16, 2015, Accessed June 22, 2025, [https://www.bbc.com/persian/arts/2015/09/150916\\_141\\_cinema\\_gang\\_milani\\_comment](https://www.bbc.com/persian/arts/2015/09/150916_141_cinema_gang_milani_comment).

<sup>71</sup>Parviz Jahed, ed. *Directory of World Cinema: Iran* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2012), 302-306.

<sup>72</sup>Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978* (Duke University Press, 2011), 155.

<sup>73</sup>Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978* (Duke University Press, 2011), 155.

<sup>74</sup>Parviz Jahed, ed. *Directory of World Cinema: Iran* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2012), 263.

<sup>75</sup>Paul Sprachman, "Ebrahim Golestan's the Treasure: A Parable of Cliché and Consumption," *Iranian Studies* 15, no. 1-4 (1982): 159.

of the Shah, the film faced suppression by key figures such as Parvīz Sābitī of SAVAK. Initially, the actors, including Parvīz Sayyād, were unaware of the film's full political implications. Sayyād claimed that the script was obscured, revealing its critical nature only upon completion.<sup>70</sup> Despite its rougher style compared to Gulistān's earlier, more stylistically refined work, the film's political and allegorical content remains significant. After its ban, Gulistān adapted the film into a novel in 1974, extending its reach and impact.<sup>71</sup>

According to Hamid Naficy, this movie stands out as Gulistān's most ambitious and vociferous film, and it became one of the most prominent critiques of the Shah's regime.<sup>72</sup> It employs a rich tapestry of analogies and allegories, presenting a surreal exploration of social values related to sex, consumerism, and family through the episodic journey of a poor rural man, played by Parvīz Sayyād. The satirical elements and anti-bourgeois, in the film, set pieces reflect a witty yet harsh critique of corruption in 1970s Iran.<sup>73</sup> The humor highlights the absurdity of the villager's attempts to embrace Western styles and values, revealing the disconnect between genuine progress and the façade of modernity. 'Alī's attempt to assimilate into elite society mirrors the nation's forced modernization—both collapsing under their own contradictions. The film's satirical approach emphasizes the emptiness of wealth and the pitfalls of imitating Western ideals, ultimately critiquing both the regime's extravagance and the societal impact of its policies.<sup>74</sup>

Paul Sprachman views this work (the novel version) as a parable that uses cliché and consumption to comment on deeper societal and psychological issues. He criticizes it for its reliance on cinematic clichés to develop its characters and narrative. He illustrates how Gulistān employs these clichés to satirize the superficiality and materialism of modern society, particularly through the transformation of the farmer who finds the treasure.<sup>75</sup>



So, ‘Alī’s compulsive purchasing reflects his biases—his inability to resist immediate gratification and his flawed belief that material possessions equate to power. This is further emphasized when he boasts about his imported clothing, “They say it’s from Paris, so it must be finer than anything in this village!” His logic is dictated by external validation rather than intrinsic value, underscoring how societal pressures shape perceptions of worth.

Moreover, Sprachman notes that this work critiques the false sense of progress and the absurdity of consumer culture. The farmer, dazzled by the glitter of urban life, squanders his newfound wealth on frivolous purchases, which symbolizes a distorted sense of progress and modernization. Sprachman also highlights the use of caricatures to portray the characters, pointing out that these exaggerated depictions serve to underscore the emptiness of their pursuits and desires. It concludes with a fitting punishment for the farmer’s crimes against nature and common sense, reinforcing Gulistān’s critical perspective on the hollow nature of materialistic ambition.

The film is renowned for its sharp depiction of societal transformations, skillfully combining social commentary with a captivating narrative to examine the intricacies of modernization in mid-20th-century Iran.<sup>76</sup> Ahmadrizā Ahmadī’s review highlights how the film preemptively predicted the 1979 revolution, using the story of the ruined mansion as a metaphor for the collapse following sudden wealth.<sup>77</sup> Abbas Milani underscores the film’s political sensitivity and its suppression due to its critical stance against the Shah’s regime.<sup>78</sup> The film underscores how the regime’s rapid and uneven modernization efforts led to tensions between traditional values and modernity, foreshadowing the revolutionary upheaval that eventually toppled the Pahlavī government.<sup>79</sup>

Symbolically, the treasure in the film represents oil, while characters such as ‘Alī, the teacher, the jeweler, and others serve

<sup>76</sup>Rezaei, Mina, and Seyed Mohsen Habibi. “Shahr, Mudirmītah, Sīnimā: Kāvush dar Asār-i Ibrāhīm Gulistān,” *Nashriyah-yi Hunar’hā-yi Zībā* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2013), 14-15.

<sup>77</sup>Parviz Jahed, *Nivishtan bā dūrbīn: Rūdarrū bā Ibrāhīm Gulistān* [Writing with the Camera: Face to Face with Ibrāhīm Gulistān] (Tehran: Akhtarān, 2005), 289–290.

<sup>78</sup>Abbas Milani, “Asrār-i ‘Asrār-i Ganj-i Darrah-yi Jinnī.’ Ravāyat’hā-yi Mutafāvit az Tawqīf-i Yak Film,” *BBC Persian*, September 16, 2015, Accessed June 22, 2025, [https://www.bbc.com/persian/arts/2015/09/150916\\_141\\_cinema\\_gang\\_milani\\_comment](https://www.bbc.com/persian/arts/2015/09/150916_141_cinema_gang_milani_comment).

<sup>79</sup>Shahāb Shahīdāni, and Parvīn Rustamī, “Bāztāb-i l’ tirāz-hā-yi Ijtimā’ī dar Fīlm’hā-yi Dahah-yi 1350 (Mutālī’ah-yi Murīdī-i Asrār-i Ganj-i Darrah-yi Jinnī, Tangsūr, and Sa-far-i Sang,” *Jāmi’ah-shināsi-i Tārikhī* 11, no. 2 (2019): 175.

<sup>80</sup>Shahāb Shahīdāni, and Parvīn Rustamī, “Bāzāb-i l’ tīrāz-hā-yi l’jīmā’ī dar Fīlm’hā-yi Dahah-yi 1350 (Mutāli’ah-yi Murīdī-i Asrār-i Ganj-i Darrah-yi Jinnī, Tangsīr, and Safar-i Sang,” *Jāmi’ah-shināsi-i Tārīkhī* 11, no. 2 (2019): 175.

<sup>81</sup>Michelle Langford, *Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019): 47–57.

as allegories for various strata of Iranian society, including the Shah and his Prime Minister. The film’s visual and thematic elements, such as the phallic tower, allude to real events like the Shāhyād monument construction and the eventual 1979 Revolution. Gulistān employs contrastive thinking—juxtaposing symbols of excess with their inevitable destruction. This is especially poignant in the final moments when ‘Alī cries out, “The road was supposed to bring riches, but it only brought ruin!” Here, the audience is forced to re-evaluate the very concept of progress.

The theme of identity, in the film, is explored through the lens of modernization in Iran during the Pahlavī era. It highlights the mismatch between modern luxury items and the lack of essential infrastructure and services.<sup>80</sup> Through its satirical tone and exaggerated characters, *Treasure* critiques the Pahlavī regime’s use of cultural heritage for nationalistic purposes, based on Michelle Langford.<sup>81</sup> It reflects on the destruction of historical and cultural values for the sake of economic gain and modernization, using allegory to convey its critical perspective on the era’s societal issues.

The *Secrets of the Treasure of the Jinn Valley* remains a powerful example of how cinema can address and challenge contemporary political realities. Despite its suppression and limited public screening, the film’s narrative and allegorical content offer a profound commentary on the contradictions of modernization and its impact on Iranian society. The film’s narrative and its suppression highlight the fragile nature of political stability and the challenges of historical truth, illustrating how political fears can shape and stifle artistic expression.

## Conclusion

Ibrāhīm Gulistān’s cinematic practice operates at the intersection of poetic structure, historical inquiry, and narrative experimentation. His films employ defamiliarization, fragmenta-

tion, and metaphor to interrogate dominant representations of industrialization, national identity, and institutional authority. Gulistān constructs layered systems of meaning in which the viewer is positioned as an active participant in meaning-making processes rather than a passive observer of events.

The documentary *A Fire* uses juxtaposition between visual sequences and poetic narration to contrast technological intervention with local labor, enabling a multi-layered critique of petroleum modernity and foreign economic presence. In *Wave*, *Coral*, and *Rock*, Gulistān mobilizes spatial metaphors and auditory dissonance to highlight the cognitive dissonance between natural systems and extractive infrastructure. The *Hills of Mārlik* reframes archaeological recovery as epistemological reconstruction, activating memory and historical consciousness through montage, rhythm, and temporal layering.

In *The Crown Jewels of Iran*, he destabilizes symbolic systems of monarchy through rhythmic modulation and cognitive reframing. The shift from stable metrical patterns to temporal instability alters the viewer's perception of sovereignty, linking spectacle to absence and dislocation. This transformation is structured around sensory-cognitive disjunctions between image, narration, and sound.

Gulistān's narrative film *Brick and Mirror* extends these operations by deploying dialogic structures, visual recursion, and existential motifs to examine ethical uncertainty, moral paralysis, and the fragmentation of agency. The film structures meaning through discontinuity, symbolic space, and interpersonal discourse, using cognitive ambiguity as a mode of narrative propulsion. The later work *The Secrets of the Treasure of the Jinn Valley* applies allegorical displacement to model socio-economic critique through inversion, caricature, and symbolic collapse. The viewer's cognitive frame is continuously challenged by the disjunction between material accumulation and ontological failure.

Across documentary and fiction, Gulistān formulates a cinematic method that foregrounds epistemological instability and interpretive multiplicity. His films generate layered interpretive fields that require constant recalibration of viewer assumptions. This framework positions Gulistān not as a recorder of historical events, but as a constructor of perceptual and cognitive architectures through which sociopolitical systems are interrogated.

